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SUBJECT: ARREST OF ANTI-COUP ACTIVISTS RAISES PROFILE OF POLITICAL PROTESTS

¶1. (U) The July 6 arrest in Chiang Rai of an anti-coup activist provided pro-democracy campaigners new fuel to attack the Council for National Security (CNS) and the continued use of martial law in 35 provinces.

¶2. (U) Sombat Boonngarm-anong, a member of the Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship (DAAD) and leader of the human rights NGO Mirror Foundation, was arrested July 6 while speaking at a rally in Chiang Rai. Sombat was detained for 24 hours along with Panithan Ayi, an Akha tribesman who works for the same foundation. (The Mirror Foundation has received State Department funding for anti-trafficking in persons programs; Sombat traveled to the US as an International Visitor in 2002.)

¶3. (U) Taken to Chiang Rai's Meng Rai military camp, the two were charged with violating martial law, still in effect throughout Chiang Rai province, as well as Article 116 under the Penal/Criminal Code for creating public disorder for the purpose of unconstitutional political change. Both were released late July 7, with no further legal action.

¶4. (SBU) Former Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Chiang Rai parliamentarian Samart Kaewmechai (a 1998 International Visitor) said that the Chiang Rai rally - including Sombat's successful effort to provoke his own arrest -- was part of a campaign to lift martial law and to oppose the draft constitution. Concerned that previous rallies in the northeast were too identified with TRT to have much impact, the organizers focused on opposition to CNS.

¶5. (SBU) According to Samart, Sombat was well treated at Meng Rai camp, but reported "unfriendly" treatment by officers from 3rd Army headquarters in Phitsanulok who interrogated him about links with TRT and accused him of a one-sided critique of the CNS and the new constitution. Sombat was allowed to receive a telephone call from National Legislative Assembly (NLA) member and former Chiang Rai senator Tuenjai Deetes, who offered to negotiate his release with CNS Deputy Secretary General Gen Saprang Kalayanamitra. Sombat turned down the offer, intending to stay in military custody as long as possible to build momentum against the military regime.

¶6. (U) The rally organizers were pleased with the outcome, believing that the reaction from academics and NGOs discouraged the military from getting tough with pro-democracy activists and increased sentiment against the junta and the draft constitution.

¶7. (U) Both Samart and a contact from the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) reported that DAAD is planning another political rally on July 11 in Lamphun and that local military leaders have made efforts to dissuade former TRT MPs and community leaders from mobilizing for the rally.

